

AT ONE *with* NATURE

With invaluable help from artist and translator friends, Caroline Zoob talks to renowned Japanese embroiderer and author Kazuko Aoki about the influences which have shaped her stitching practice and career.



It is not until we are older that we can look back and piece together the patchwork of influences that sent us along a particular path in life. For celebrated Japanese embroiderer Kazuko Aoki (hereinafter Kazuko san), one piece in that patchwork was spending part of her childhood in a *shukuba-machi*, one

of the old post towns along the ancient, cedar-forest-lined Tokaido highway which joined Kyoto, the former capital of Japan, with Edo, now Tokyo. It was and remains an environment redolent of history and rich in nature, arguably Kazuko san's greatest source of inspiration. As a girl, Kazuko san loved to draw ➡



ABOVE & LEFT Kazuko san always works from life when she designs a wreath, gathering the flowers and arranging them around a plate filled with water, balancing colour, sizes and shapes until she is happy with the design. This approach makes her wreaths wonderfully life-like, rather than stylised. Note the amount of detail captured in the cornflowers, with their tightly plaited perianths and fluffy flower heads.

RIGHT AND BELOW

Kazuko Aoki working in her studio.

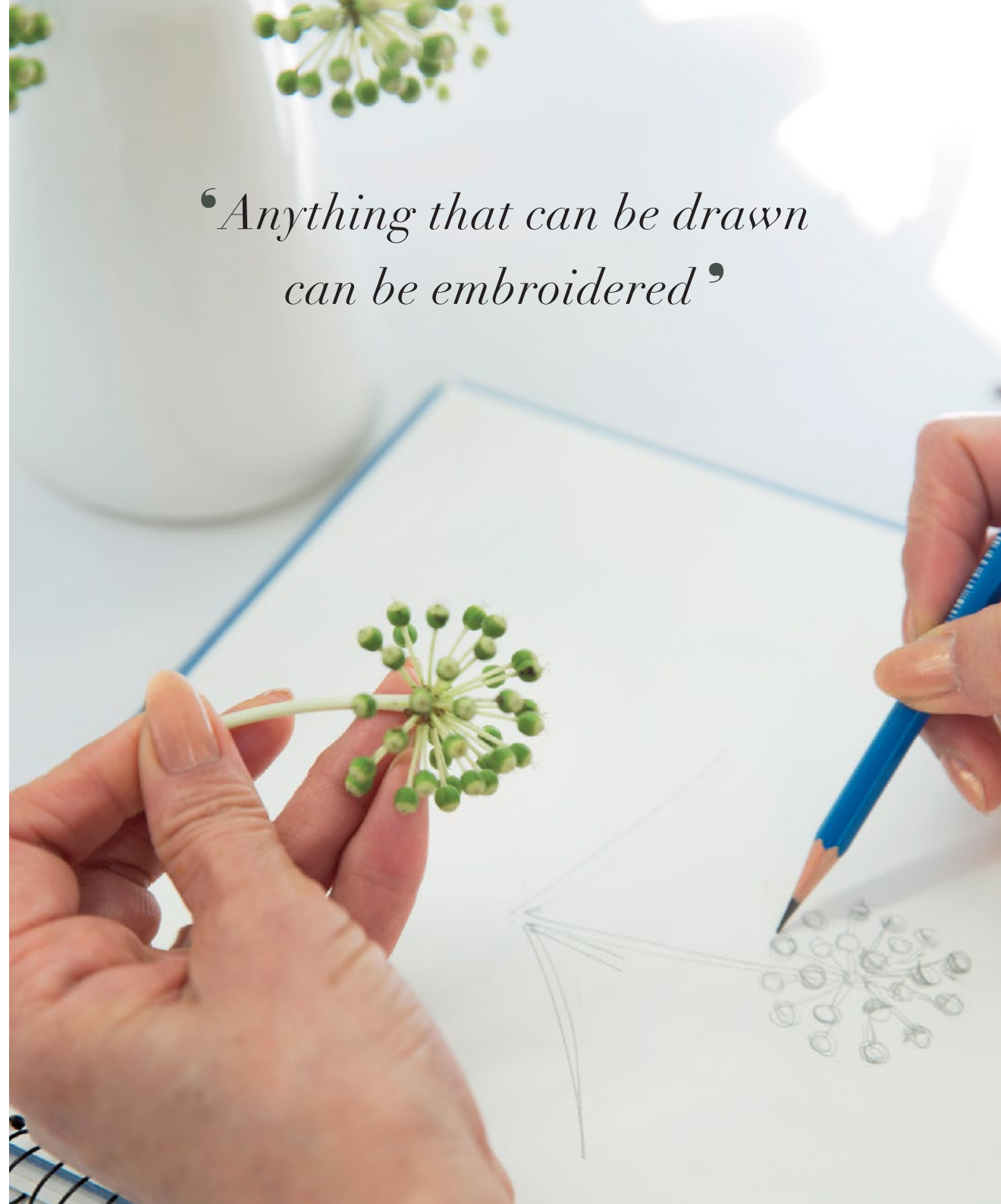


but she recalls very clearly the day she first stitched, without drawing, a basket of daisies on a piece of brown fabric. "It was my first embroidery. Drawing was fun, but I was fascinated by the experience of drawing with thread." Another early influence was her grandmother who had, most unusually for women at that time, studied Japanese painting at Women's Art School. She also made exquisite kimonos. "My grandmother was always surrounded by beautiful fabrics, and I think that is one reason I am doing what I do today," Kazuko san muses. It was because of the trail blazed by her grandmother that Kazuko san encountered no opposition to pursuing a career

in art, taking up a place at Musashino Art University, one of the most distinguished schools of art in Japan, founded in 1929. There, she specialised in textile design, although her course involved learning many different craft techniques, including wood and metal work, and ceramics. Indeed, Kazuko san attributes her confident use of mixed media in her embroidery to the wide range of skills she acquired at university. Lectures on Swedish textiles, and especially on the way they feature hand embroidery, served to increase Kazuko san's interest in embroidery. After working for three years as a colour consultant in a corporate environment, she took time out to do a postgraduate year at the Borås Textile Institute in Sweden. This time in Sweden proved to be a huge influence, not only on her work but also on her lifestyle at home in Japan. "I like the way people live in Sweden, and the way they use plants indoors, filling their windowsills with displays, no matter what the season. In particular, I like the Scandinavian colour palette of clear yet muted colours which blend together so well. My work is greatly influenced by the simplicity and beauty of Scandinavian design."

Back in Tokyo, in 1982, Kazuko san had her first encounter with things British through an exhibition of Contemporary British Textile Art. Four years later, she made her first trip to England, taking ➡

*'Anything that can be drawn
can be embroidered'*



in the Knitting and Stitching show and the wonderful Chelsea Craft Fair. (Indeed, we might have passed each other in the crowds as 1986 was also the first year I went to Chelsea, after which it became an annual pilgrimage.) This visit to England, and seeing the work of different textile artists proved an even stronger nudge towards focusing on a career as an embroidery designer. By now, Kazuko san was married and raising a family, and embroidery was something she could do at home, taking commissions from magazine publishers, holding exhibitions of her work and, eventually, writing the embroidery books which, even before they were translated from Japanese, have inspired so much of the embroidery we now see from all over the world on Instagram. Images of Kazuko san's home and studio reveal yet another influence from her travels, for the house is an American import, reminiscent of the clapboard houses of New England, strikingly simple, with white weatherboarding. The spareness and clarity in Kazuko san's work is reflected in the simplicity of her home and gar-

den. Perhaps it is a combination of the uncluttered Japanese style, mingled with the Scandinavian influence. Although she claims that there are days when her studio becomes untidy, one finds it hard to believe, for everything is immaculately ordered in drawers, including her vast collection of threads.

The studio stands adjacent to the house, so Kazuko san's commute to work is short, unless she is distracted en route by the garden she has created over thirty-four years, and which is clearly the recipient of as much creative energy as her embroidery.

When the demands of motherhood left little time for gardening, Kazuko san decided to make gardens and plants the subjects of her embroidered work, rather as celebrated American photographer, Imogen Cunningham, made her three young sons and the magnolia tree in her garden the subject of her early photographs. One might go so far as to suggest that Kazuko san's garden is her muse, rather as Monet's garden at Giverny was to the painter. Looking through her books ➡

BELOW An embroidery by Kazuko san of a precious teacup bought when studying in Sweden.



“The garden doesn’t just influence my embroidery style, it also plays a major part in my everyday life.”

and work it is clear that she derives much of her inspiration from plants and wildlife, from the humblest little flowering weed in the crevices of her garden to her show-stopping roses. Kazuko san is a natural observer: making notes in her illustrated field guides, recording the date and location of where she spotted a plant in the wild. She notices everything, from the patterning on a borlotti bean pod to the rough hairiness of a sage leaf. Like so many of the successful embroiderers featured in these pages, Kazuko san taught herself to stitch. However, her

formal art and design training is in evidence when it comes to her work processes. Her books are models of clarity, with accurate and meticulously annotated diagrams. She has been working on books and designs for various companies for many years, and is passionate about finding simple, unchallenging ways of approaching her designs in stitch: "maximum effects with minimum efforts", as she puts it. Using her artist's training and eye to capture the essentials of the subject at hand with preparatory drawings and paintings, she edits these ➡



ABOVE 'Garden peas are a favourite companion plant for rambling roses.'



For her book *Embroidered Kitchen Garden*, Kazuko san gathered herbs and vegetable plants from her own garden, drawing and painting them in watercolour, before adding potential thread colours neatly attached.

How often do we go through our stash of fabrics and threads and think how well some might go together for a project? Take a moment to pin little swatches and snippets on to a card, with a note of where you have stored things, and pin it to your memo board.



to include just enough of the details to make it not only instantly recognisable but tangible. She uses a limited number of stitches: "the most important tip is not to use difficult stitches, but to choose the right stitches. Learn a few simple stitches and you can embroider all sorts of things." It is little wonder Kazuko san's books and television appearances are so popular.

Kazuko san writes at least one book each year. "When I start to work on a new ➡

RIGHT & BELOW For her book of flower embroideries, published in 2019, Kazuko san researched rose gardens and recalled an inspiring exhibition of the work of British artist Su Blackwell, who creates, among other things, astonishing book-sculptures, often within the realm of fairy tales and folklore. The stitched flowers in this image could not be more different, and yet are wonderful and an example of how the inspiring work of one artist can foster equally inspiring originality in another. **LEFT** Thread swatches are gathered by shade for a project.





*'To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee,
One clover, and a bee.
And revery.
The revery alone will do,
If bees are few.'* EMILY DICKINSON

*She stores
these paintings
with the threads
attached – “gifts
to my future self”*



FAR LEFT This piece, inspired by a favourite poem by Emily Dickinson, was commissioned for the cover of a craft magazine published in 2017 by the Japan Broadcasting Corporation, the equivalent of the BBC.

LEFT Preparatory work for the embroidery of the Juneberry tree (below) for Embroidered Kitchen Garden.

book, I have to open all the drawers in my head.”

This involves an intense week of solo brainstorming in her studio. The wall is papered with post-it notes, sketches, swatches, words and random ideas. If a book is the result of a trip, souvenirs, found objects, tickets and other ephemera are laid out to create a mood board, refining the selection as the work progresses.

Sketches and watercolour paintings are still her favourite way of coming up with a new idea or design, particularly when she is working on books or kits. As a way of preparing herself for any design, she often sketches and paints the flowers in her garden, attaching little bundles of the embroidery threads she might use if she were to embroider them. Even if they prove unsuitable for the project in hand or she does not have time to develop that idea, she stores these paintings with the threads attached – “gifts to my future self”. ➡





This thorough preparatory approach is in complete contrast to the way she works on her own pieces for her eagerly anticipated but rare solo exhibitions. "I draw a rough layout, but the rest is stitched freely."

When I suggest to Kazuko san that there is perhaps a subtle hint of something Japanese about her work – in the sense ➡

THIS PAGE *Green Bottles* (featuring a collection of vintage bottles found on a trip to England) and *Green Hand*, two works from Kazuko Aoki's solo exhibition of 2011.





“When I start to work on a new book, I have to open all the drawers in my head.”

of it having a spaciousness, the compositions beautifully balanced and harmonious – she modestly demurs from counting herself among Japanese artists, but concedes that, occasionally, she too is struck by an unconscious influence in her work of the Japanese woodblock landscapes – *ukiyo-e* – of artists such as Hiroshige and Hokusai in their use of space and the way they play with perspective. Her spare depiction of Derek Jarman’s garden is an example, with the red valerian flower large in the foreground and tiny Prospect Cottage in the distance, rather like Hokusai’s wave dwarfing Mount Fuji in the distance.

Looking back to identify the important influences in one’s life is often illuminating, but for Kazuko san it is the beauty of the world, presented anew each day that provides the greatest inspiration. “I believe it is important for everyone to be inspired by the beauty of the world and to feel it in their heart.” ❖

With grateful thanks to Kazuko Aoki, Hiro Kawada, Noriko Sugano, Helen Ott and Rebecca Wells, without whose efforts, for one reason and another, this article could not have been written.



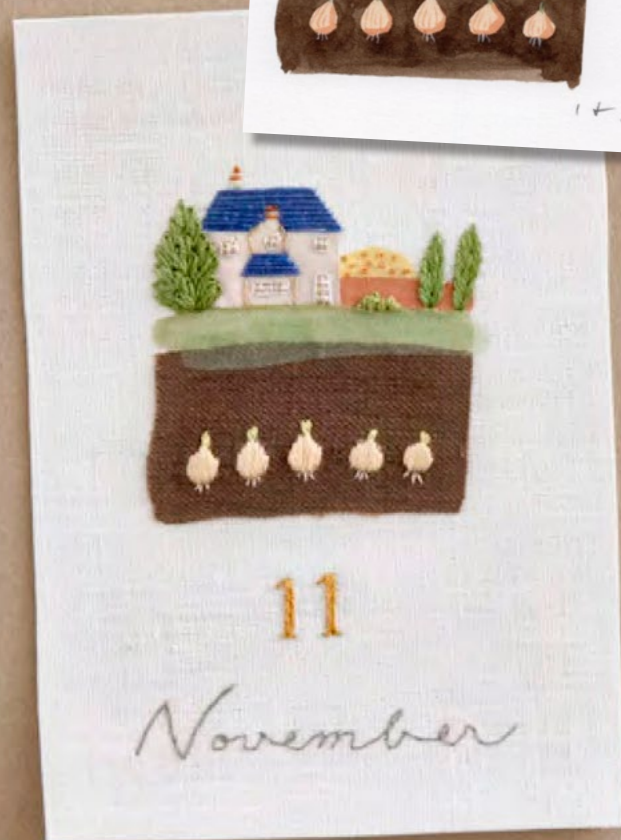
ABOVE A piece created by Kazuko san following a visit to Derek Jarman’s extraordinary garden created on the expanse of shingle surrounding Prospect Cottage, a black-tarred fisherman’s shack in the shadow of the nuclear power station at Dungeness on the Kent coast of England.

Embroidered Kitchen Garden and Garden Stitch Life are published in English by World Book Media/Zakkaworkshop and are available from Amazon. Photographers Yukori Shirai, Noriaki Moriya, Josui Yasuda and Kazuko Aoki.



PAINT into STITCH

Artist Hiro Kawada's watercolours featured in the gardening pages of Country Living Magazine provide inspiration for embroiderer Kazuko Aoki in a chapter of her new book *Kazuko Aoki's Little Embroidery Journey*



Kazuko Aoki loves to travel and her new, and in my view most inspiring book to date, *Kazuko Aoki's Little Embroidery Journey*, published in Japan by Nihon Vogue, contains a collection of embroideries inspired by encounters on her travels with various artists and makers. Full of inspiring photographs, exquisite embroideries and clear diagrammatic instructions (even if you do not speak Japanese) it is a real treat for stitchers. One of her 'encounters' is with artist Hiro Kawada, whose charming watercolour and mixed media illustrations graced the pages of Country Living Magazine for many years. Kazuko Aoki has translated some of Hiro Kawada's original watercolours into stitch, showing how inspiring the medium of watercolour can be for embroidery. ❖

Hiro Kawada teaches collage techniques and *moqu*-style watercolour painting, which is painting with no outline, no preliminary drawing or sketch. Rather, the shapes are created with washes of paint. Follow @hiro.kawada_artist on Instagram for details of occasional online courses.



ABOVE Watercolour illustration by Hiro Kawada
BELOW LEFT Hiro Kawada's watercolour paints.



Kazuko Aoki's *Little Embroidery Journey* published by Nihon Vogue. To buy the book, visit amazon.co.jp and enter Kazuko Aoki ISBN 4529060667